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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENNAI 000413

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SUBJECT: BJP SET TO TIGHTEN ITS GRIP ON KARNATAK IN DECEMBER 27
BY-ELECTIONS

REF: A) CHENNAI 89, B) CHENNAI 192, C) CHENNAI 315, D) CHENNAI 326
E) NEW DELHI 2513

1. (SBU) Summary: The Bharthiya Janata Party (BJP) looks poised to tighten its grip on the reins of Karnataka's government on December 27, when the state holds seven by-elections (ref A). The BJP currently has 110 of the 224 seats in the legislative assembly, and was able to form a government (becoming the first durable, BJP government in South India) following the May elections with the support of several of the assembly's six independent members (ref B). Even though the BJP appears likely to do well in the by-elections and thereby secure a solid majority in the legislative assembly, the party faces further problems. Fissures in the state's party apparatus may already be appearing, as those who helped finance the party's rise in the state begin to feel sidelined by its ideologues. End Summary.

By-elections needed to fill defectors' seats

2. (SBU) Karnataka's state elections brought to power the first BJP government in South India in May, when the party won 110 of the assembly's 224 seats, outdistancing handily its main rivals, the Congress Party (80 seats), and Janata Dal-Secular (JDS, 28 seats). With the support of several of the assembly's six independent members, the BJP formed a government and its leader, B.S. Yeddiyurappa, became Chief Minister. Soon thereafter, three Congress members and five from the JDS ditched their parties to join the BJP (obtaining attractive positions as the heads of ministries in the process). India's "anti-defection" law requires these rebels to resign and re-contest their seats in by-elections. (One of the defectors' seats is mired in a legal challenge and will not be contested on December 27.)

BJP likes its chances

3. (SBU) Political analysts from a leading national daily told us that the BJP should do well in the by-elections. Not only were the now-BJP candidates local strongmen who would be likely to win as a member of any party, they said, but the appeal of having a candidate from the governing party should also increase their chances.

4. (SBU) In addition, they noted that the opposition parties are in disarray in the state. Siddaramiah, a key Congress figure and member of the Kuruba community, which has a heavy presence in several of the by-election constituencies, has not campaigned for Congress candidates and several of his supporters are now actively working on behalf of the BJP. They also told us that JDS supporters, disenchanted with the candidates selected by the party's bosses (including former Prime Minister Deve Gowda), are defecting en masse to the BJP, reducing the ability of the party to engage in typical labor-intensive campaigning. Even a Congress Party member of the state's legislative assembly, usually prone to over-estimating his party's electoral chances, conceded that Congress will struggle to avoid embarrassment in the by-elections.

The enemy within?

15. (SBU) If, as expected, the BJP solidifies its grip on state power in the by-elections, then its greatest challenges may well come from within. A local political analyst told us that about half of the BJP's state legislators are former Congress and JDS members who do not generally subscribe to the strands of the party's ideology emphasizing Hindu nationalism (often referred to as "hindutva"). He said that BJP pro-hindutva ideologues (as well as ideological supporters within the larger pro-hindutva Sangh Parivar movement to which the BJP belongs) feel themselves being sidelined, which may encourage them to engage in pro-hindutva activities that may alienate other BJP members and supporters. He also suggested that the attacks on churches in the state in September (refs C-E) may have been part of this phenomenon, an interpretation shared by the journalists we spoke with. (Comment: The leadership of Karnataka's Bajrang Dal organization -- also part of the Sangh Parivar -- claimed responsibility for the attacks. Both state and national BJP leaders criticized the violence and the Bajrang Dal, and Karnataka's BJP government increased police protection for churches. End Comment.)

16. (SBU) A Bangalore-based journalist for a national daily told us that the BJP's inexperience in governing was becoming a problem. She noted that previous governments (either JDS- or Congress-led) were better able to cover their tracks when taking bribes or engaging in other corrupt practices, distancing key politicians from potentially incriminating acts. The BJP politicians, she said, are not necessarily more corrupt than their opponents, but are far less adept at it. She opined that this, over time, will give opponents evidence to use against the government.

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17. (SBU) A former politician (an ex-member of both the JDS and Mayawati's BSP) told us that Yeddiyurappa's leadership style, which tends to ignore those outside of a tight inner circle, was also grating on the nerves of other BJP leaders. He suggested that some of these BJP lieutenants were already plotting to leave the BJP and form their own party.

18. (SBU) Another analyst told us that another challenge to Yeddiyurappa may come from Karunakara Reddy, an iron-ore mining magnate who has provided a big chunk of the BJP's funding in Karnataka. Reddy is presently Minister for Tourism, and is not very happy about being given a peripheral post in return for the wads of money he has bestowed on the party, according to the analyst, who says that Reddy sees himself as a future Chief Minister. The ex-JDS and BSP politician told us that the BJP plans to move Reddy to New Delhi if it wins the upcoming national elections, due before May. If the BJP fails to form the next national government, he opined, Reddy may well take his money -- and a fair number of state legislators inclined to support him -- to form his own party.

Comment

19. (SBU) Barring several unexpected upsets, the BJP should consolidate its grip on power in Karnataka in the December 27 by-elections. If much of the political chatter we've heard from our interlocutors is true, however, politics in the state should remain interesting, as factions within the BJP vie for power while Congress and the JDS continue their slow implosions in the run-up to national elections.

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